

Body Building sermon series
Rough Knees - James 5:13-16
October 13, 2024
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Well, we're coming to the end of our five-week spiritual workout routine, led by our faith fitness instructor, James. We may not have rock-hard abs or bulging biceps, but I hope we have taken James's advice and developed big ears for listening, broken hearts filled with compassion, dirty hands that do God's work, and pierced tongues that only say good and Godly things. Today, we'll get our last workout as we learn to have knees worn rough through time spent in prayer.

Now, the image of rough knees is a metaphor. We don't have to pray on our knees with our eyes closed and heads bowed. We can pray in all different kinds of ways: we can be standing, sitting, or driving the car; we can have our eyes open or closed, but if you're driving the car please pray with eyes open; we can have our hands folded, hands raised, hands by our side. The goal is not a flawless technique; the goal is the act of praying. But in order to reach that goal, you have to actually pray. And yet, so many of us give lip service to prayer but never really commit to it.

That's pretty ironic since we live in such a big sports town. Being a fan of UK athletics almost requires a robust prayer life...and probably a few words of confession for the language we use. Players pray when they score a touchdown or point to the sky when they hit a homerun, and let's not forget the sport of football features the most holy and reverent of plays: the Hail Mary. I think it's humorous that an announcer will describe a last-second desperation shot by saying, "He throws up a prayer!" because that's often how real prayer is viewed. Prayer is seen only as a last resort, the last-ditch effort when everything else has failed, instead of something we should do on a regular basis.

On one of our mission trips with my former church, a youth fell and seriously hurt her tailbone. While we waited for an ambulance, the host minister gathered us around the girl and said, "C'mon, let's be about doing what we're supposed to do." And we prayed for her. We didn't do it because there was nothing else to do. We did it because, as Christians, that should be our first response, not our last one. When we only turn to prayer when there's nothing left, we seriously underestimate the power that is at our disposal through prayer.

Notice how James weaves prayer into the rhythm of everyday life. He says if you are suffering, you should pray. He says if you are cheerful, you should sing, which is simply prayer set to music. Are you sick? Are you celebrating? Are you angry? Are you just blah? You should pray. Rather than seeing prayer as a lifeline only to be used in emergencies, James says prayer should be a natural part of our everyday life. Henri Nouwen calls prayer "the breath of Christian existence."

And yet, we have trouble committing to such regularity in prayer. Why is that? Maybe it's because prayer feels like a waste of time. We have to-do lists and emails to answer, so how can we justify spending precious time in which nothing is accomplished? We are a results-oriented society, and too often our time spent in prayer yields no tangible benefit. And, really, is God even listening to little ol' us? Doesn't God have bigger issues to attend to? Hurricanes, wars, UK football games. So why pray?

In our productivity-oriented culture, I think we sometimes focus too much on the results and not enough on the process. Our prayer time is not about sitting on God's knee and giving

God our spiritual wish list. Prayer is about developing a long-term relationship with God. Phillip Yancey wrote, "Prayer includes moments of ecstasy and dullness, mindless distraction and acute concentration, flashes of joy and bouts of irritation. In other words, it's like all our other relationships." We pray and pray and pray because that's how we build our relationship with God. But that takes time, doesn't it, just like building any kind of relationship takes time. Prayer is simply a relationship between two people, one of whom happens to be God. Dallas Willard says, "Prayer is talking to God about what we are doing together."

But that doesn't mean there are always instantaneous results. Sometimes during my prayer time I get a sense of peace, other times I get impatient. Sometimes I get clarity on a decision, and other times I get bored. Sometimes I'm reminded of God's love for me, and other times I wonder if God is even listening...or if I really am.

I believe we seriously undersell the magnitude of what can happen when we pray. We are tempted to easily dismiss it as a fruitless exercise or to mentally check out and we forget that when we pray we are doing nothing less than talking directly with the Creator of the universe. Prayer is a spiritual power tool. Jesus says in Mark's gospel that if we have faith, we can pray that a mountain be thrown into the sea and it will happen. So why isn't prayer more important for us?

Maybe you're worried your prayers aren't good enough. You may not think your prayers are particularly eloquent or spiritual, but as soon as we start applying those kinds of categories to prayers I think we miss the point. The quality of prayers cannot be judged by length or vocabulary or rhyme scheme. I believe some of the most powerful prayers are the simplest. Martin Luther stepped on every pastor's toes when he said, "The few the words, the better the prayer." And writer Anne Lamott says, "The two best prayers I know are 'Help me help me help me' and 'Thank you thank you thank you.'"

Of course, even the most well-spoken person in the world doesn't have the vocabulary to truly capture the essence of prayer. As humans, we're simply too limited in our ability to pray. If we place high expectations on our prayers, we'll always fall short. God knows we are limited in our prayers and has given us someone to stand in the gap between what we pray and what God hears. Paul tells us in Romans that, "The Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words." The Holy Spirit is our messenger, taking our bumbled, clunky, grammatically incorrect prayers and delivering them to God's ear. That takes the pressure off, huh? A monk once said that, "For many years I was bothered by the thought I was a failure at prayer. Then one day I realized I would always be a failure at prayer, and I've gotten along much better since then."

It doesn't matter if our English teacher would approve of the structure of our prayers, because James reminds us of what our prayers can accomplish. He says that a prayer said in faith will make the sick person well and bring healing. Notice James doesn't say these prayers will cure the sick person. James says they will make the person well, and there are a lot of ways to be made well other than physically. Even as our bodies deteriorate, our faith can be healed, our relationships can be healed, our souls can be healed. James is not advocating prayer for the removal of trouble as much as he is for the strength to endure our circumstances and to connect with God. James says, "Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another so that you may be healed." That implies that our healing comes through praying for someone else. God created us to be in relationship with others, and we live out that calling when we include others in our prayers, especially those for whom we don't want to pray.

James concludes our workout session by reminding us that the prayers of a righteous person are powerful and effective. That word “righteous” may sound intimidating – “Well, that’s certainly not me!” - but it simply means anyone who professes faith in God. Our faith should lead us to seek God, to learn about God, to spend time with God, to grow closer in our connection with God. And prayers that are offered out of that connection are powerful, because they are built on the relationship we’ve developed with God. If a stranger asks to talk with me, I’ll listen, but I’m not invested in that conversation. But if my wife wants to talk with me, I’ll listen differently because of the relationship we have built between us. I believe God hears all prayers, but the prayers offered out of a close relationship with God draw upon the full power of God’s healing and presence. We neglect our relationship with God, we neglect our prayer life, and then we wonder where God is during tough times. God is right there, but we haven’t conditioned ourselves to hear God’s voice. That’s only done through consistent prayer.

The only way we can become more effective prayers is to pray. We don’t have to pray eloquently; we only have to pray faithfully. We have to rough up our knees in prayer on a regular basis. During the course of our day, we have the opportunity to turn the focus from ourselves and our lives to God, to put God at the center of what we say and do. This can be a simple pause in the midst of the day to give a word of thanks. James says to pray when we’re in trouble, when we’re happy, when we’re sick. It doesn’t matter the situation, there’s always a reason to pray. To give thanks for making it home safely. To ask God to comfort a loved one who is struggling. To lift up people in other countries. To praise God for our families. Or, simply to say thank you for God’s continuing presence.

To be an effective prayer, we simply should see each day as an opportunity to tell God something we want God to know, and to listen for what God wants us to know. Theologian Soren Kirkgard wrote, “The true relation in prayer is not when God hears what is prayed for, but when the person praying continues to pray until they are the one who hears what God says.” Through our daily exchanges, a relationship is nurtured that will bless our lives in unexpected ways. And if we aren’t praying, we’re missing out on that relationship. If you’re not sure what to say or where to start, how about “Help me” or “Thank you.” The Spirit will take it from there.

Big ears, broken hearts, dirty hands, pierced tongues, and rough knees. Our Body Building regimen is now complete. From where I stand, I have to say that you look a lot like Jesus. Now, go show the world.